

# Section Three – Introduction

## Living as a Child in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye: Navigating Between Solidarity, Collective Pressures and Kinship Support in the Times of Disruption

*Elena Kim and Doris Bühler-Niederberger*

### Abstract

This section focuses on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye where knowledge on children and youth has been misconstrued as homogenous and ahistorical. To address this epistemic gap, authors explore the social, cultural and economic experiences of children and youth, their expectations, aspirations and risks under the premise that the region's imperial history, participation in the Soviet Union and postindependence transition, and post-imperial present account for and produce social and historical continuities which persist and make for differently experienced childhood, adolescence and youth. Chapters in this section emphasize diverse and creative ways in which young citizens living in Central Asia and Caucasus (CAC) countries engage in negotiating, collaborating, adapting and confronting challenges and barriers presented by the rapidly changing social realities shaped by global labor market transformation, growing economic inequalities and advanced communication systems. This analysis is done from the standpoint of those on whose behalf research is conducted – the youth and children themselves.

*Keywords:* Azerbaijan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Türkiye; childhood and youth; intergenerational solidarity

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This section's geographic focus is on three countries of post-Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus (CAC) countries – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, we have added a study of childhood in Turkey to this section, as this country does after all have some proximity to the CAC countries (linguistically, in terms of religion and in geographical location). This particular choice is necessitated by a problem of a missing account in the accumulated body of knowledge on children and youth, produced predominantly in North America and Europe – the peculiar silence about or/and a misconstrued representation of the region's domestic and family life. Indeed, more often than not we have been subjected to superficial, homogenous, ahistorical and synchronized portrayals of contemporary Central Asian children and youth bereft of pertinent historical and social backgrounds. It was also noted that youth in transition and children's life stories have been constructed with no references or recourse to the older generations (Bhat, 2018). Our goal here is to reinstate a meaningful analysis of childhood and youth experiences conducted under the premise that the region's imperial history, participation in the Soviet Union's *civilization mission*, postindependence transition and postimperial present account for and produce social and historical continuities which persist and make for differently experienced childhood, adolescence and youth. We set out to use empirically based and locally produced approaches to analytically explore the social, cultural and economic experiences of children and youth, their expectations, aspirations and risks. Importantly, our objective here is to elucidate and radiate diverse and creative ways in which young citizens living in CAC countries engage in negotiating, collaborating, adapting and confronting challenges and barriers presented by the rapidly changing social realities shaped by global labor market transformation, growing economic inequalities and advanced communication systems. The youth and children, we are looking at in this section, were born in families or/and to parents whose lives were abruptly disrupted in the 1990s by uncertainties, postcolonial nation-state building, access to global markets and erosion of state welfare. These circumstances meant more diversity, opportunity and flexibility for these new generations as well as new threats and insecurities, yet these rich sites of experiences have not yet been thoroughly understood. This section embraces the unique opportunity to study various youth scenarios by mobilizing five systematically and methodically conducted studies pertaining to youth and children's everyday life experiences in modern CAC countries.

The strikingly insignificant references to the region's youth in serious and critical debates about youth and children are a recurrent theme in all the contributions in this section. As *Mariya Levitanus* describes it, paucity of sources on childhood in the region was consistent prior to the region's encounters with the imperial Russia and later when the Soviet Union turned these countries into the Soviet Socialist Republics. With research interest to children and child rearing growing in the socialist era, it focused on the imperial center of Russia and the European part of the USSR, leaving behind its peripheral Southern territories. As a result, today the discipline of childhood studies is nonexistent, while research on childhood is limited to ethnographies of childhood rituals and customs. *Aysel Sultan*, *Doris Bühler-Niederberger* and *Nigar Nasrullayeva* echo the reckoning

about the gap in the literature around child rearing, children's voices and their own understanding of subjective well-being. Acuteness of the necessity to urgently address this gap evolves from the considerations that after three decades of transition, economic crisis of 2008, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the ongoing war in Ukraine present a mix of old and new challenges for improving the lives of children and youth. These predicaments have and will continue affecting youth and children disproportionately.

Yet, it would be unfair not to mention the 2022 special issue in the *Journal of Child Indicators Research on Foundations of Children's and Youth's Well-being in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan*, edited by Hunner-Kreisel and coeditors. The authors focus on two countries, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, to discover various sources of influences on children's well-being with a shared thread of arguments centering upon dysfunctions within the countries' state-funded social infrastructure. Editors there posited that the interactions among such institutions as the family, the state and international human rights interventions form important impacts for the well-being and welfare of youth and children, and these observations were generalizable to the areas beyond the said geographic regions (Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022). From this special issue we learned about several current challenges in the region. One was that the international discourse on children's welfare and the local social policies were often in discord with each other. The commitments made in international treaties did not align with the realities and practicalities of the various local circumstances and institutions. Second, the youth and children having the right to participate in society and needing protection were almost never consulted about how they can best access them (Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022). Third, in understanding childhood and youth development in these two countries, relationships between the family and the state must be questioned on such parameters as "formal and informal education, questions of mobility and space, normality, and deviation from it through children's and young people's social and cultural practices, institutional welfare, social and health policies, and their problematizations including questions of socially ordered (power) relations according to class, gender and generation" (p. 1134). The special issue showed how interactions between patriarchal social institutions and contemporary families tended to discard youth's well-being as a value. In this subsection of the Handbook, we extend these authors' scholarship to build more knowledge about how young people in CAC countries themselves actively interact with what they see as oppressive and cope with adversities asserting their own resilient capacities and agency in distinct contexts and conditions.

It must be understood as one reads the chapters in this section, that in the countries we are examining, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, deinstitutionalization and erosion of state-funded social services shifted the responsibility of social reproduction from the state to families (Huseynli, 2018) to provide care for children, the sick and the elderly. Bearing in mind the conditions of malfunctioning welfare state, decaying social and physical infrastructure, unemployment and insufficient financial resources, this placed a considerable burden on families and women in particular. Indeed, the historical backdrop in which we invite you to contemplate the questions we are posing is complex and

multifaceted. Briefly speaking, this kaleidoscope necessarily incorporates post-imperial collective trauma exacerbated by political uncertainty and instability, revivalist national ideology and ethnic identity formation policies riddled with traditionalization of gender norms and hierarchized gender order, valorization of patriarchy, Islamization of social norms and everyday practices, corruption, labor migration, but also globalization, urbanization, international humanitarian presence and a notable discourse of a democratic vector of development (Kim, 2022a, 2022b).

Nonetheless, this section's geographic focus rationale extends beyond filling a gap in the childhood literature on the peripheral regions like the CAC countries. We offer a valuable research standpoint from which we explore childhood experiences by adopting an epistemological approach to speak from the standpoint of those on whose behalf research is conducted. It is our position that any talk about inequality, poverty and injustices cannot be fully grasped without an epistemological turn to a bottom-up approach in which the silenced ones can occupy an agentic standpoint from which our knowledge and understandings are derived from. This contrasts itself from the more classic decorum of scholarly process, one in which dominant theories inform conceptualization of inquiries and shape the findings in terms of the categories inherent to these theories (Smith, 1987, 2005).

## **Contextualizing Contributions**

This section begins with the contribution by *Mariya Levitanus* who reports on queer childhood in Kazakhstan and, specifically, on the cultural production of queer childhood narratives. She pays attention to the notion of silence around nonconforming sexuality and the impacts this silence has on queer-identifying Kazakh youth. Quite in the spirit of this handbook, Mariya incorporates her analysis about youth's own contestation of social pressures and refusal to play along with their relegated role of what she calls an "impossible subject." She notes the dire absence of queer childhood studies in the region and offers to bridge this gap by moving beyond the ethnocentric and heteronormative perspective of childhood in Kazakhstan.

Next is a chapter by *Ekaterina Chicherina* whose analysis centers on migration aspirations among the teenagers in Kyrgyzstan. Drawing upon 14 interviews with adolescent participants living in Kyrgyzstan, she reveals predominance of out-migration in the narratives for future among these young Kyrgyz citizens. They seek to remove themselves from the Kyrgyzstan's unsatisfactory education and employment opportunities. Interestingly, Ekaterina's findings illustrate that their individual mobility desires have a rather collective nature and underpinning, such that she labels them as "the collective project of the family." Personal life trajectories are embedded in the interests and expectations of their families and shaped by what is considered best for their kinship. In children's own mental schema of adulthood, their success is defined in terms of their ability to provide care to their parents and siblings – something that only becomes possible if they

live and work outside of Kyrgyzstan. Conflicts emerge when parental wishes collide with young people's own imagined lifestyles. This contestation becomes a site for them to overcome ambivalences and establish their own agency, including adapting and transforming their aspirations for the future.

*Aysel Sultan, Doris Bühler-Niederberger and Nigar Nasrullayeva's* chapter on Azerbaijani children's smartphone use unravels the moderating role of the device on the quality of interactions among generations. Their findings are impressive in, for example, showing how smartphones mediate enactment of different identities in children, including those of a "responsible child" and how smartphone use can both reinforce and disrupt familial solidarity. The authors move further into confident demonstration of how the use of smartphones can help children to reestablish and renegotiate generational relations and facilitate *generationing*. This happens as a function of smartphones' affordability to foster shifting of social boundaries, norms, expectations and needs of parents and children in new ways and spaces. Notably, this contribution boasts an innovative approach to the modern study of childhood, the sociomaterial approach, which allows for a new understanding of children's agency as distributed among human and nonhuman forces and its inherently relational nature.

This is followed by a chapter on children at the threshold between childhood and youth in Türkiye. Türkiye is also a mainly Muslim country of Asia and it is very present in Central Asian countries, with the offer of schools, universities, consumer goods, and accordingly it plays an important role in the migration plans of young Central Asians. In addition, there is a certain linguistic proximity because the majority of the inhabitants in the three countries of Central Asia/Caucasus speak Turkic languages. Türkiye is sometimes seen as a "between country" (reference?), a bridge between Europe and Asia. But it is also true for this country – with a conflict-ridden history and present – that large groups of adolescents are affected by the numerous unresolved political and social problems in the country and that the scientific study of these problems has only gained momentum in recent years. *Aytüre Türkyılmaz* provides more detailed information on the achievements and gaps of childhood research in Türkiye in her chapter. The pubescents *Aytüre* studied are striving to expand the scope of action in their rather hierarchically structured families. They are partially successful in this, via a skillful "trust management" that they engage in. At other points, they have to or want to give in, in order to prevent their relationships with their parents from becoming too conflictual.

Lastly, *Elena Kim* takes us back to Kyrgyzstan to examine *nebere aluu*, an intergenerational child-rearing setting of informal kinship fosterage wherein grandparents adopt their first grandchild to raise as their own. Elena is concerned with the contemporary iteration of *nebere aluu* from the perspectives of the grandparents themselves, responding to the opaqueness of their roles in this practice in media and scarce scholarly sources. Holding their standpoint central to the inquiry, Elena discusses the phenomenon as reflective of a destabilizing social, economic and political context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, in which the practice acquires unique social significance and reinforces intergenerational care and continuity allowing for reconciliation and solidarity among diverse family

members. Elena illuminates grandparents' voices to unfold grandmothers' own grappling with generational and gender asymmetries as they raise the children and expect reciprocation of care and gratitude in the future. Building upon their higher status of authority these participants partake in and perpetuate the power relations imposed on them but simultaneously enhance solidarity and mobilize support for the benefit of the younger generations.

In compiling these five chapters in this section, we seek to provide our audience with a reflective reading of the dynamic connections between contemporary social transformations in Central and Western Asia and childhood/youth experiences of everyday lives from the intergenerational and relational lens. We believe that we are offering enough material for you to ponder upon the questions of specifying the diverse experiences of people we study from the vantage point of local and global dynamic processes and transformations posing causal consequences in shaping children's and youth's life opportunities and entering into communication with them. We hope that this section can be used to establish a possible conceptual frame to widen and foster a locally relevant and theoretically sophisticated childhood and youth study in Central and Western Asia.

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